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978-1-107-07417-0 - African American Slang: A Linguistic Description

Maciej Widański

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## African American Slang

In this pioneering exploration of African American slang – a highly informal vocabulary and a significant aspect of African American English – Maciej Widański explores patterns of form, meaning, theme, and function, showing it to be a rule-governed, innovative, and culturally revealing vernacular. Widański's comprehensive description is based on a large database of contextual citations from thousands of contemporary sources, including literature and the press, music, film, and television. It also includes an alphabetical glossary of 1,500 representative slang expressions, defined and illustrated by 4,500 usage examples. Due to its vast size, the glossary can stand alone as a dictionary providing readers with a reliable reference of terms. Combining scholarship with user-friendliness, this book is an insightful and practical resource for students and researchers in linguistics and general readers interested in exploring lexical variation in contemporary English.

MACIEJ WIDAŃSKI is a professor of linguistics specializing in lexical variation and its description. He has conducted research on slang since the early 1990s and has written extensively on the subject. His recent books include *The Dictionary of City Names in American Slang* (2011) and *Yinglish* (2012).

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University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

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[www.cambridge.org](http://www.cambridge.org)

Information on this title: [www.cambridge.org/9781107074170](http://www.cambridge.org/9781107074170)

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First published 2015

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

*A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library*

*Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data*

Widawski, Maciej.

African American slang : a linguistic description / Maciej Widawski.

p. cm

“African American Vernacular English (AAVE).”

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-107-07417-0 (hardback)

1. Black English. 2. African Americans—Languages. 3. English language—United States—Slang. 4. English language—Social aspects—United States.

5. African Americans—Social conditions. 6. African Americans—Education—Language arts. I. Title.

PE3102.N42W43 2015

417'.2—dc23 2014030463

ISBN 978-1-107-07417-0 Hardback

Additional resources for this publication at [www.cambridge.org/delange](http://www.cambridge.org/delange)

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978-1-107-07417-0 - African American Slang: A Linguistic Description

Maciej Widawski

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Contents

---

<i>Introduction</i>	<i>page</i> ix
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	xiii
<i>Abbreviations</i>	xv
<b>1 Foundations</b>	<b>1</b>
1.1 Terminology	2
1.1.1 African American	2
1.1.2 Related terms	5
1.1.3 Slang	7
1.1.4 Related terms	8
1.2 Methodology	12
1.2.1 Scope	12
1.2.2 Collection	15
1.2.3 Description	16
<b>2 Forms</b>	<b>19</b>
2.1 Combining	19
2.1.1 Compounding	19
2.1.2 Affixation	32
2.1.3 Phraseology	36
2.2 Shortening	43
2.2.1 Clipping	44
2.2.2 Initialism	48
2.2.3 Acronym	49
2.3 Conversion	50
2.3.1 Verbification	50
2.3.2 Nominalization	51
2.3.3 Other processes	52
2.4 Blending	53
2.5 Borrowing	54
2.5.1 Loanwords	54
2.5.2 Loan translations	56
2.5.3 Eponyms	57
2.5.4 Brand names	58
2.6 Creating	59
2.6.1 Coinage	59

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07417-0 - African American Slang: A Linguistic Description

Maciej Widawski

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

vi	Contents	
	2.6.2 Onomatopoeia	60
	2.6.3 Respelling	61
	Summary	64
3	Meanings	66
	3.1 Figuration	66
	3.1.1 Metaphor	67
	3.1.2 Metonymy	68
	3.1.3 Other processes	69
	3.1.4 Figuration themes	73
	3.2 Shifting	77
	3.2.1 Generalization	77
	3.2.2 Specialization	78
	3.2.3 Melioration	79
	3.2.4 Pejoration	80
	Summary	81
4	Themes	83
	4.1 Common themes	83
	4.1.1 Body	84
	4.1.2 Physiology	85
	4.1.3 Sexuality	85
	4.1.4 Alcohol	86
	4.1.5 Drugs	87
	4.1.6 Categorization	88
	4.2 Specific themes	90
	4.2.1 African Americans	90
	4.2.2 Africana	91
	4.2.3 Racism	92
	4.2.4 Whites	93
	4.2.5 Violence	94
	4.2.6 Entertainment	95
	4.2.7 Luxury	96
	4.2.8 Geography	96
	Summary	97
5	Functions	99
	5.1 Social functions	99
	5.1.1 Identification	99
	5.1.2 Rebellion	102
	5.1.3 Interaction	104
	5.1.4 Secrecy	104
	5.2 Psychological functions	105
	5.2.1 Emotions	106
	5.2.2 Humor	108
	5.2.3 Toughness	110
	5.3 Rhetorical functions	111
	5.3.1 Informality	112
	5.3.2 Stylization	112
	5.3.3 Conciseness	114
	5.3.4 Forcefulness	116

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07417-0 - African American Slang: A Linguistic Description

Maciej Widański

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents	vii
5.4 Cultural functions	117
5.4.1 Wordplay	117
5.4.2 Word battle	118
5.4.3 Assimilation	119
Summary	122
Conclusion	124
<i>Glossary</i>	128
<i>Bibliography</i>	272
<i>Sources</i>	277
<i>Index</i>	292

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07417-0 - African American Slang: A Linguistic Description

Maciej Widawski

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

---



Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07417-0 - African American Slang: A Linguistic Description

Maciej Widawski

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Introduction

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This book presents a linguistic description of African American slang, a highly informal vocabulary coined by or typically associated with African Americans. It grew out of my professional involvement and personal interest in the subject as a sociolinguist, lexicographer and educator. I consider African American slang linguistically innovative and culturally revealing, and feel it deserves scholarly attention. This introduction describes why, how and for whom this book was written, why it is original, and what it contains.

African American slang is a significant part of African American Vernacular English (AAVE) and an important component of American slang. In the mid 1980s, slang lexicographer Robert Chapman opined: “With the prominence of black people in the armed forces, in music, in the entertainment world, and in street and ghetto life, the black influence on American slang has been more pervasive in recent times than that of any other ethnic group in history” (1986: xi). This influence is increasing: one of the most authoritative experts on slang, Jonathan Lighter (1994: xxx-xxxii) lists it among the most important influences on general American slang, as do such prominent slang scholars as Connie Eble (1996), Michael Adams (2009), Tom Dalzell (2010), Jonathon Green (2010) or Julie Coleman (2012). The significance of African American slang is aptly illustrated by two facts: (1) slang statistically makes up at least 10 percent of all vocabulary known by the average American, and (2) African Americans today constitute over 13 percent of all United States citizens, thus being the second largest non-white ethnic group in the country.<sup>1</sup> These figures speak for themselves and are reflected by the enormous linguistic and cultural importance of African American slang. As evidenced by its high occurrence in the nationwide entertainment media, African American slang is more and more popular among Americans regardless of their ethnic origin and exerts an increasingly marked influence on general American English.

<sup>1</sup> Estimates based on data found in Lighter (1994) and available from the US Census Bureau (2014).

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07417-0 - African American Slang: A Linguistic Description

Maciej Widawski

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## x Introduction

The main impetus behind writing this book stems from this linguistic and sociocultural significance, yet there are other reasons as well. African American slang – just as with slang in general and AAVE in the recent past – is still commonly perceived as a deficient deviation from standard English (see, for instance, Lapp 2004: 56 or Wolfram 1998: 103–111). Quite undeservedly so! In reality, linguistic features of African American slang are as systemic as those of AAVE, those of slang and those of standard English. In other words, it is a perfectly rule-governed linguistic system which incorporates aspects of experience that are culturally specific. To paraphrase linguist Connie Eble (1996: 2), African American slang is part of the common lore of language rather than an anomaly. In fact, it is often richer in its linguistic expression than general slang, which is evident in how readily African American slang is borrowed by other ethnic groups in the United States. And so, quoting African American scholar and poet Clarence Major, my goal is “to bring to the language we call [African American] slang a better name [and] a better reputation” (1994: xxvii).

Another reason is the surprising scarcity of book-length monographs focusing specifically on the linguistic description of African American slang. While many excellent books have been written on AAVE since the 1970s – works by William Labov (1972), Joey Dillard (1972), John Baugh (1983), Salikoko Mufwene (1998), John Rickford (1999), Walt Wolfram (1999), Shana Poplack (2000), Lisa Green (2002) or Geneva Smitherman (2006), for example – they focus on its sociolinguistic variation, historical development or educational implications, and only in a limited way concern African American slang. The same is true about hip-hop – the subject of books by Samy Alim (2006) and Marcyliena Morgan (2009) – an important source of slang which nevertheless cannot account for the entirety of African American slang. Nor does African American slang feature specifically in general books on slang: the several pages in Connie Eble (1996), Michael Adams (2009) and Julie Coleman (2012) – although valuable contributions to the field – are hardly enough. Introductory essays in the dictionaries by Clarence Major (1994) and Geneva Smitherman (2000a), seminal books on the subject, are extremely helpful but necessarily limited since these books focus on a lexicographic presentation of slang lexicon rather than its systematic, descriptive analysis. Consequently, one must look elsewhere. Information is scattered in books on AAVE and hip-hop usage, or in materials on general slang. This scarcity is especially perceptible by students of linguistics, American studies or African American studies who need a practical source of information on the subject from a purely linguistic viewpoint.

This work is an attempt to remedy this situation. Written in the fashion of traditional descriptive linguistics, it focuses on the analysis of slang expressions based on a large database of authentic lexical material. It explores

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Maciej Widawski

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

patterns of form, meaning, themes and functions of African American slang in order to enhance our understanding of this phenomenon and demonstrate that it is a creative and rule-governed system, in no way deficient in comparison with standard English. Additionally, it presents an extensive selection of representative African American slang expressions, defined, annotated and illustrated by thousands of real-world examples, thus serving as a practical and useful reference work. At the same time, the book deliberately avoids discussion of extralinguistic themes such as the sociocultural context, public perception, or the historical development of African American slang. It also focuses on synchronic rather than diachronic description; in other words, it is based on the state of African American slang as used today and not in the past. Finally, although aimed at linguists, culture scholars and educators, this book is written in a manner which is hopefully also suited to the general readership as it avoids linguistic nomenclature, though this is explained when necessary.

This book also differs from other monographs on the subject in that it is based on a large database of authentic lexical material and draws from it extensively. The main idea behind creating such a database was to get as much exposure to African American slang as possible and to record its usage in natural contexts from various contemporary sources. To that end, the citations have been collected from diverse contemporary African American sources including film, television, magazines, literature, the internet and utterances by African Americans; however, non-African American sources were also included in the database to see the impact African American slang has had on the general slang used in America. The material was collected during my research in the United States in 1999–2000 and 2009–2014, but, in a broader context, constitutes part of my extended professional involvement starting in the early 1990s in collecting, documenting, analyzing and translating slang. Detailed information on the database can be found in the first chapter.

The descriptive character of this book is reflected in the organization of its content. It follows the formalized description of slang used in my earlier works, covering a wide range of linguistic topics and allowing an examination of slang from various perspectives. Chapter 1 (Foundations) has an introductory character: it defines the main linguistic terminology associated with African American slang, including *AAVE*, *slang* and related terms; it also explains the research methodology employed in data collection and presents the format of description used in this book. Chapter 2 (Form) deals with the morphology of African American slang and presents wordbuilding processes such as combining, shortening, conversion, blending, as well as borrowing and creating. Chapter 3 (Meaning) focuses on the semantics of African American slang: it examines the processes of figuration such as metaphor or metonymy, and analyzes the main semantic shifting processes such as generalization, specialization, melioration and pejoration. Chapter 4 (Themes) deals with

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978-1-107-07417-0 - African American Slang: A Linguistic Description

Maciej Widawski

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## xii Introduction

lexical fields in American slang presenting the most productive themes, including those common to the general slang and those specific to African American culture or seen from an African American perspective. The last chapter (Functions) concerns pragmatic aspects of African American slang: it discusses its social, psychological, rhetorical and cultural functions. Chapters 2 through 4 are appended with brief summaries which are meant to make the book more user-friendly, especially in an educational context. An integral part of the book is the extensive Glossary: making up roughly half of the volume, it could easily stand as a dictionary in its own right. The Glossary lists representative expressions of African American slang appended with definitions and usage examples, and is intended to serve as a practical and useful reference.

Usage is illustrated extensively with examples from the database throughout the book, and reliance on citational evidence is a distinctive feature of this book. The examples are clearly set off from the main text and grouped in separate paragraphs. Their purpose is to illustrate linguistic patterns of African American slang, show slang expressions in context, and authenticate their usage by clearly identified dates and sources. There are over 1,000 examples in the main text of the book and a further 4,500 examples in the Glossary. All examples were taken from the larger, aforementioned database of citations.

Viewing slang from the position of an outsider, as most sociolinguists and lexicographers do, affords a more detached and thus perhaps a more objective description. I hope that this research-based scholarly monograph will inspire the reader to perceive African American slang as it is: a significant, innovative, rule-governed sociolinguistic phenomenon inherently connected with African American culture, and an important lexical contribution to American English deserving attention and appreciation.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07417-0 - African American Slang: A Linguistic Description

Maciej Widawski

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Acknowledgments

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I wish to thank Professor John Rickford of Stanford University, author of *African American Vernacular English: Features, Evolution, Educational Implications*, for his tremendous support for the project, his valuable remarks, and his lavish hospitality during my research stay in Stanford and Berkeley; Professor John Baugh of Washington University in St. Louis, author of *Black Street Speech: Its History, Structure, and Survival*, for his encouraging comments and generous support for the book; Professor Jonathan Lighter of the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, editor of the *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang*, for his insightful remarks on slang and his cordial hospitality during my Fulbright Scholarship in Knoxville; Professor Jacek Fisiak, OBE, of University of Social Sciences in Warsaw, author of *Linguistic Change Under Contact Conditions*, for his unstinted enthusiasm for my academic endeavors.

At Cambridge University Press I would like to thank Helen Barton for her generous support and continued interest in my project resulting in the publication of this book; Kay McKechnie for her superb copy-editing; and Joanna Breeze and Helena Dowson for their excellent management of the production of the book.

I also wish to thank Professor Malgorzata Kowalczyk, author of *Americanisms*, a fellow sociolinguist-lexicographer participating in my *Slang Project* at the University of Gdansk, for her expert assistance in the management of the lexical database; Professor Michael Adams of Indiana University, author of *Slang: The People's Poetry*, for reading portions of the manuscript and offering several constructive suggestions and incisive comments; and Phillip Goss of Evansville, Indiana, a consulting editor of my *Polish-English Dictionary of Slang and Colloquialism*, for his enormous assistance in editing the entire manuscript.

Let me also express my appreciation to three people who long ago inspired my later professional pursuits: Andy and Peggy Newman of St. Louis, Missouri, for arousing my interest in slang and colloquial English, and my African American uncle, Walter Tefreden, of Paramaribo, Suriname, for introducing me to the world of soul culture.

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-07417-0 - African American Slang: A Linguistic Description

Maciej Widawski

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## xiv Acknowledgments

This book has been a work in progress for many years. During this time, several ideas from it were incorporated into my other work, specifically being the basis for two academic papers: “Compounding in African-American Slang” published in 2011 in *Kwartalnik Neofilologiczny* of the Polish Academy of Sciences, and “Figuration and Shifting in African-American Slang” published in 2013 in *Studia Anglica Posnaniensia*. Some ideas were also incorporated into my teaching practice and were discussed during my lectures, seminars and presentations, specifically at the University of Gdansk and the University of Social Sciences in Warsaw. I hereby wish to thank my audiences for their interest and valuable feedback.

The examples presented in this book come from a database which draws from various sources covering literature, television, film, music, press, social media and others. Every effort has been made to identify the original sources of these examples. Sometimes, however, in cases such as lyrics from unpublished rap songs, obscure unprinted material or ephemeral web pages, this proved to be challenging. Should any oversights be brought to my attention, I will be happy to include appropriate updates in any subsequent editions of this book.

The lexical material used in this book was verified and expanded using library resources at the following academic institutions: Arizona State University (Tempe), City University of New York, Columbia University (New York), Duke University (Durham, NC), Harvard University (Cambridge, MA), McGill University (Montreal), New York University, Princeton University, San Francisco State University, Simon Fraser University (Vancouver), Stanford University, Tulane University (New Orleans), University of Alabama (Birmingham), University of Alabama (Tuscaloosa), University of Arizona (Tucson), University of British Columbia (Vancouver), University of Calgary, University of California (Berkeley), University of California (Los Angeles), University of California (San Diego), University of California (Santa Barbara), University of Chicago, University of Gdansk, University of Miami (Coral Gables), University of Mississippi (Oxford), University of North Carolina (Chapel Hill), University of North Florida (Jacksonville), University of Ottawa, University of Social Sciences (Warsaw), University of Tennessee (Knoxville), University of Toronto, University of Washington (Seattle), University of Wisconsin (Madison), Yale University (New Haven, CT) as well as New York Public Library and Library of Congress (Washington, DC). Due acknowledgment is given.

Cambridge University Press

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Maciej Widawski

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

## Abbreviations

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While this book generally avoids abbreviations in the main text, the following grammatical and bibliographical abbreviations appear in the Glossary:

<i>adj.</i>	adjective
<i>adv.</i>	adverb
<i>excl.</i>	exclamation
<i>n.</i>	noun
<i>num.</i>	numeral
<i>phr.</i>	phrase
<i>pron.</i>	pronoun
<i>v.</i>	verb

BK	Barbara Kipfer and Robert Chapman, <i>Dictionary of American Slang</i> (2007)
CM	Clarence Major, <i>Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African American Slang</i> (1994)
GS	Geneva Smitherman, <i>Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner</i> (2000)
JG	Jonathon Green, <i>Green's Dictionary of Slang</i> (2010)
RK	Randy Kearse, <i>Street Talk: Da Official Guide to Hip-Hop and Urban Slang</i> (2006)